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070414Z Jun 05

ACTION DRL-00

INFO	LOG-00	AID-00	CIAE-00	DODE-00	EAP-00	EB-00	UTED-00
	VC-00	TEDE-00	INR-00	IO-00	L-00	VCE-00	AC-00
	NSAE-00	NSCE-00	OES-00	OIC-00	OMB-00	PA-00	PM-00
	PRS-00	ACE-00	P-00	SP-00	SS-00	STR-00	TRSE-00
	T-00	IIP-00	PMB-00	PRM-00	G-00	SAS-00	/000W

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FM AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH CITY
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1597
INFO AMEMBASSY HANOI PRIORITY
ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

UNCLAS HO CHI MINH CITY 000600

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KIRF](#) [VM](#) [HUMANR](#) [RELFREE](#)
SUBJECT: RELIGIOUS FREEDOM: VIETNAM'S HOA HAO UNDER PRESSURE

REF: HCMC 433 and previous

1. (SBU) Summary: A recent spike in tensions between Hoa Hao dissidents and police in the Mekong Delta province of An Giang highlights the divisions in Vietnam's Hoa Hao community between the GVN-controlled Executive Committee of Hoa Hao Buddhism (ECHB) and independent, unrecognized groups. The family of the spiritual founder of the faith, Huynh Phu So, appears to disdain both sides. The Hoa Hao Central Buddhist Church (HHCBC) led by Le Quang Liem accuses the family of "selling out" their religion, and states that it will continue to oppose the ECHB. The police are wary of the Hoa Hao's -- and Liem's -- strong anti-Communist roots, and treats Liem and his followers as a potential threat to the regime, a role that Liem appears to relish. End Summary.

What is Hoa Haoism?

2. (SBU) Hoa Haoism was founded in the 1930s by Huynh Phu So, the son of a village elder in the Chau Doc area of the Mekong Delta. Doctrinally, the faith is a variant of Buddhism that stresses individual worship as the means of attaining a richer spiritual experience and salvation. So led the Hoa Hao into the National United Front, a group of nationalist organizations seeking Vietnamese independence. He would not accept Communist leadership, which led to open conflict between the Hoa Hao and the Communists. Many Hoa Hao believe that in April 1947 the Viet Minh ambushed and executed So in the Mekong Delta city of Long Xuyen, although his body was never found. Some Hoa Hao followers believe So is still alive. Estimates of the number of followers of Hoa Hao Buddhism vary widely, in part because the nature of the religion emphasizes at-home practice, with minimal adornments, few celebrations, and no dignitaries. The official GVN estimate is two million followers, centered in the Delta's An Giang and Dong Thap provinces. Hoa Hao dissident groups claim there are over four million believers. Contacts in the official Hoa Hao community stated that they had applied to Hanoi for permission to conduct a formal census of followers and properties.

GVN-sanctioned Hoa Hao says all is well

3. (SBU) During a recent visit to the Mekong Delta, we met with Nguyen Tan Dat, the standing Vice-Chief of the newly formed Executive Committee of Hoa Hao Buddhism (ECHB). The ECHB is an expanded, 21-person replacement for the Hoa Hao Administrative Committee (HHAC), which was formed when Hoa Haoism was recognized by the GVN in 1999. Dat was well aware of Vietnam's designation as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC), but said this was a result of a lack of information on the part of U.S. authorities. He claimed that Vietnam's religious freedoms "meet the needs" of its Hoa Hao community. However, any believer who conducts "illegal religious activity" must be subject to punishment. Asked for an example of what illegal activity might be, Dat cited failure to ask permission from the government to hold public religious activities. He compared the situation of unrecognized Hoa Hao sects like that of Le Quang Liem to the Branch Davidians, asserting that even the USG restricts the activities of religious groups which it considers to be suspicious.

4. (SBU) The ECHB was not pushing the GVN to return property confiscated after 1975. While they are conducting an inventory of their temples for "possible recovery," other formerly Hoa Hao-owned facilities must now be considered "community property," the ownership of which has been transferred for good. Dat summarized the overall philosophy of the ECHB in a closing statement: "The happiness and development of the people overall is more important than human rights and religious freedom."

15. (SBU) Dat escorted us to visit the founder's family in their temple at Phu My town, An Giang province. There we met with Tu Be and Bui Van Duong, the niece and nephew of the founder, respectively. Dat and his deputies sat in on the meeting; thus we were not surprised that the family's answers were bland and conformed closely to Dat's earlier responses. However, their non-verbal cues made it clear that there was little love lost for either the GVN-recognized board or Hoa Hao dissidents. They said that it was "inappropriate" to hold a large ceremony commemorating the disappearance of the founder, as no one can be sure if he is alive or not. While the family members stated that they are acquainted with Hoa Hao dissident Le Quang Liem and that he was welcome to worship at family-run events, they were unwilling to talk in detail about him or his group. The only time the family became truly animated and passionate was when they gave a brief history of the founder and the faith's traditions and practices.

Dissidents uncompromising

16. (SBU) The "Hoa Hao Central Buddhist Church (HHCBC)," the Hoa Hao dissident group of Le Quang Liem is firm in its opposition to the GVN-recognized ECHB. Over the past few months, Liem and his supporters have held a series of public gatherings in the Mekong Delta. On May 4, Liem traveled to Dong Thap province to meet with followers. The meeting was entitled: "The Event In Which Believers Have Sworn To Sacrifice Their Life As Well As Their Property For The Cause Of Hoa Hao Buddhism." The following day the group released a statement, in which they criticized the ECHB for slandering Liem. They alleged that Dat had been distributing documents that state that Liem "opposes the Communist government," and that calls for the return of Hoa Hao property, commemoration of the Founder's Disappearance, and public dissemination of Liem's teachings violate Vietnamese law. (Per reftel, two followers of Liem were arrested in March for illegally disseminating Hoa Hao teachings that included commentary from Liem.) 126 "delegates" from approximately 25 districts across the Mekong Delta attended the meeting, which was closely monitored by police, but not stopped. The delegates declared that they were willing to self-immolate to protect "pure Hoa Hao," which they define as the pre-1975 church.

17. (SBU) In early June, Liem's group organized another rally in the Delta to commemorate the first death anniversary of Hoa Hao dissident Ha Hai, who died from cancer two weeks after being released from prison. Liem claimed that fighting broke out between the police and over 100 Hoa Hao followers. The Hoa Hao had posed for photographs with a sign that read: "hunger strike in protest of the Communist GVN's repression of Hoa Hao Buddhism;" the photographs have been transmitted overseas. One believer threatened to self-immolate -- he poured gasoline over his body -- before the police backed down. On June 4 we received reports that police were ransacking the homes of Hoa Hao followers in attempt to seize the cameras that recorded the event. On June 6 we spoke with the head of the Committee for Religious Affairs in An Giang, who complained that the province had given Liem permission to hold the event, but that the unfurling of banners critical of the GVN and the use of loudspeakers to criticize the ECHB was a provocation.

18. (SBU) Concurrent with the rally, Liem's group released two lengthy open letters that accused the Party of trying to wipe out "pure Hoa Haoism by all dirty means." The letters call on the GVN to cease its attacks on Liem, to halt its repression of Liem's followers in An Giang province, to allow Liem's group to hold whatever religious events it wishes, to reopen a the Hoa Hao seminary closed after the war, and to return all properties belonging to the Hoa Hao, seized after the war. The letters also called on the GVN to dissolve the ECHB and to recognize officially the day of the Founder's disappearance as a Hoa Hao holiday. The letters concluded with a claim that 200 Hoa Hao have launched a hunger strike and that six Hoa Hao believers are prepared to self-immolate to protest the GVN's treatment of the Hoa Hao. Copies of the letters and photographs were posted on June 4 on a Hoa Hao dissident website.

Police nervous

19. (SBU) According to a confidential police report leaked to a Vietnamese dissident website, a meeting of senior police leaders from Southern Vietnam designated Liem as a "focus area" for police. The report said that the police goal should be to "restrict and educate" him. His group is regarded as a "reactionary force," and among other efforts, the police reportedly wish to restrict his ability to communicate with USG officials.

110. (SBU) Comment: Over the past few months, authorities had eased pressure on Liem somewhat, allowing him to travel from HCMC to the Delta and allowing his group to gather to commemorate the Founder's disappearance (reftel). Liem was well briefed on our decision not to impose CPC sanctions and no doubt is aware of the

upcoming visit of PM Phan Van Khai to the United States. He also has made it clear that he still feels deep enmity for the Communists. Liem would know that organizing and filming his followers with banners denouncing GVN treatment of the Hoa Hao would cross a police redline. Similarly, his demand that the GVN recognize the Founder's disappearance day, a move tantamount to recognition of the Communist murder of the Hoa Hao founder, would be interpreted as a political threat to the regime. We have made it clear to Liem that while we support freedom of religion and peaceful assembly, we did not condone violence and would halt all contact if he were to encourage his followers to self-immolate. It is notable that the founder's family isn't interested in opposing the GVN and ECHB, despite entreaties from the dissidents.

11. (U) Bio note: The 84-year old Liem was the number three in the Hoa Hao hierarchy prior to 1975. Since 1975, Liem has had numerous confrontations with authorities as he campaigned for "total independence" of the Hoa Hao Church. He also formed an "interfaith council" with religious freedom activists Father Nguyen Van Ly and United Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) leader Thich Thien Hanh. Most recently, he was under a restrictive Administrative Detention order from 2001 to 2003.

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